THE SACRED JOURNEY

4. Power

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Scripture
Ezekiel 37:1-6, 14
John 11:1, 17-27

"And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live,..."
-Ezekiel 37:14a (RSV)

At the top of her career as a popular comedienne, so the story goes, someone asked Phyllis Diller to what she attributed her ability to make people laugh. She thought for a moment and said, "When you have the matter of death resolved, the rest is easy."

The distinguished psychologist, Abraham Maslow, was recuperating from a very serious heart attack when he wrote to a friend

"The confrontation with death - and the reprieve from it -makes everything look so precious, so sacred, so beautiful that I feel more strongly than ever the impulse to love it, to embrace it, to let myself be overwhelmed by it. My river has never

looked so beautiful... | Death, and its ever present possibility, makes love, passionate love, more possible. | I wonder if we could love passionately, if ecstasy would be possible at all if we knew we'd never die." [Rollo May, Love and Will, p. 99]

And so, ~~two weeks before Easter~~, (~~as preface to the drama of the passion, the entry~~ to ~~Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the trial and crucifixion,~~) we come to the question that lies beneath all our questions: | how shall we live in the presence of the reality of death?

~~It is the question behind~~ ~~No one ever put the issue more powerfully and~~ eloquently than Macbeth..., ~~for instance~~

> "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time:
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death..."

Along the way, this matter of death, | death in general and our death in particular, is something with which we must contend. | It is not easy to do so. | It is a topic easily and conveniently ignored. In a culture whose values are success, power,

Joeseph Sittler your 1970 B/C Lecturer, one of most thoughtful theologians of our generation. Prof. at U of C - who one more alive: | loved life music; Fr. Horn; Lit. & poetry; fine wine - wrote a theological essay once on the miracle of Polish Sausage.. Lived fully to the end.. Invited (Blind) Ham types preach at my ~~last~~ time | he agreed: | to discuss it? "I'll come to you"... He did - 80 + blind - ~~in Chi~~ by bus. The last thing he wrote was a book of essays Gravity + Grace - Last Chapter is Again + Letter G.. in it he says

"we must stop this conspiracy of silence about death + talk openly of it. | One can go to church a whole life time and never hear a sermon on death.. elderly people can teach younger ones it's OK to talk about it

the great literature of our race - Updike 4th + final in a series of Books that chronicles the mid 20th 50's 60's 70's-80's Rat Rest His finest

"Losing is like death" said Vince Lombardi, who knew a lot about winning.

winning - death is the ultimate irony... the ultimate, and inevitable loss. "The one who dies with the most toys wins." Perhaps, but the bottom line is not much of a victory.

Our way of life insultates us from dying... Birth and death, until recently happened mostly in the sterile isolation of a hospital room. Death is the new pornography, someone noted. Scotsman George Docherty used to say that in his native land sex was unmentionable and all the jokes were about death. Today, in this country, it's the other way around. Death is unmentionable and most of the jokes are about sex.

And then one day you bump into it: a dear friend dies, or you find you are looking at the obituaries with more personal attentiveness than usual, or suddenly, out of the blue, you are reminded of your own mortality. "Have you noticed that you will die?" Annie Dillard asks innocently. It is the most profound question with which the artist contends, the source either of a maddening despair, or perhaps the loveliest creativity. But

claims the bumper sticker on BMW..

At least we have allowed birth to re-enter mainstream; it's now a social event. Death used to be condemned to a tiny room full of cig. smoke, old issues of Life + Look + dog photos. Today Dad is in birthing room as matter-of-greeter, host, medical assistant + camera man..

And hospice - thank God.. for dear people who provide hospice service.. has helped many people.. by bringing death back into life. But we still have a long way to go

Birth and death, at least until fairly recently, unlike now, were hospice → mirror of NY Ave. P.C in Washington -

confront it we must, and you can either deal with this matter or push it away, back into the recesses of your mind where it will not stay for long. The famous existentialists Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus agreed that there is a sense in which you are not alive until you embrace your own death... which is surely part of what Abraham Maslow meant. And it is surely what happened to a peculiar prophet of Israel by the name of Ezekiel one day, but that does get us ahead of ourselves.

(1) The river never looked so beautiful before he confronted his mortality..

I have been proposing in these talks that ~~one of~~ a good way the ~~ways~~ to look at our own lives, is as journeys of faith, Sacred Journeys... that we are called to this journey by our creator, given provisions along the way, including the confidence we need. I have been proposing that the story of God's people in the scripture of the Old Testament, is, in a sense, a metaphor for the story of everyone of us; that we can see our own lives and experiences in the mirror of the Bible... the lives and experience of the individuals in the story; but also in the whole,

sweeping panorama.

So we thought about Abraham and Sarah: settled, mature, established, and how God called them to pack up and move and made an unlikely promise that they still had quite a future to live; and how it is the nature of God to call us to the adventure of living faithfully.

And we thought about the children of Israel after their unlikely liberation from Egyptian slavery, ("murmuring in the wilderness,") complaining to Moses because there was no food and no water, and how good the security of slavery looks when you are in the wilderness; and how when you know how hungry and empty and vulnerable you are, God provides for your deepest needs.

And we thought about how when God needs a King for Israel, the choice falls on someone who does not appear to be qualified, a wisp of a lad by the name of David, and we thought about God's love for and faithfulness to David even though David does some terrible things; and we considered the

mystery that there is nothing we can do to cause God to stop loving us. God sees possibility in all of us, and seeing our potential, has confidence in us.

Today, as we continue the story of God's people, their journey comes to a difficult time, a time of loss and grief; a time when it does not seem plausible that meaningful life can go on. That, too, is a metaphor for a stage in life's journey for each of us. But first the story.

It is about the exile, a very important period in Biblical history. In the year 598 B.C. the small Jewish state had become a nuisance to the ascendant Babylonian Empire: so the Babylonians carried off a small group of Jewish leaders from Jerusalem into Babylonian exile. A temple priest by the name of Ezekiel was among them. The Jerusalem government entered an unwise military pact with Egypt; the Babylonians became very angry, sent their army back in, this time leveling the city, executing the royal family, and exiling the

entire ruling class - the upper crust of Jerusalem society. It would appear to be the end of the line. After their escape from Egypt, wandering in the wilderness, the conquest and settling of the land, the unification of the people under a monarchy... it would appear that Israel was confronting the fate of every earthly kingdom - extinction. After years in Babylonian exile, the Jewish community would simply disappear, melt into the prevailing culture of Babylon. Ezekiel, without a temple to be a priest in, becomes a prophet and begins to interpret the events he is watching unfold, putting them in the larger context of God's will. And so it is that Ezekiel has a vision of a valley strewn with bones, an eloquent symbol of ~~death of~~ the his nation's prospects. Some historians suggest that there actually was such a valley, a battlefield where the armies of Israel lost to the Babylonian forces, that all those bones were what remained of Israel's fighting force, and that the exiles saw that sight on the long march

(+) Babylonians were crafty.. They did put Jews in concentration camps or even ghettos.. but invited them to settle in the Bab. culture God plan -

and the nation's existence - its life is at stake..

into captivity.

In any event, it is a grim, but powerful image. But, in his vision Ezekiel receives an astonishing promise. The bones will live. God will breathe breath into them and they will live. In the midst of death - life. In the midst of the most eloquent image of human mortality - God's dearest promise of power to go on living.

The promise of faith is that God's love is more powerful than death and that therefore, ultimately, there is no reason to fear. The Bible doesn't say much more than that on the subject. The church, of course, has speculated endlessly on who gets in and who doesn't; religion has been entranced with the topic... "the guest list and the decor of eternity," someone quipped. The Bible doesn't. What the Bible focuses on is the promise of God's eternal love which transforms death into life: despair into joy, and turns into power for living in the present for those who know it and trust it.

The * furniture of heaven + the temperature of hell. Reinhold Niebuhr said

Joe Sittler wrote .. The Bible says, "whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." Period. That word is immensely satisfying ...

"I will put my spirit in you and you will live," God says to the dry bones in Ezekiel's dream; and to anyone else who happens to feel like those bones, like death warmed over - which means all of us, sooner or later.

The simple truth is that on this journey there are going to be bad days. It is not possible ultimately to insulate yourself. It is not possible to love very long without sustaining a loss. Sigmund Freud taught that it is a primal and basic fear and that every small separation in life reminds us of final and ultimate separation.

It comes at us in different ways, of course. The death of a loved one, the death of our own grandparents and parents: the random death of dear friends.

People who measure stress say it is the most traumatic thing that will ever happen to us. Sometimes it comes in the form of the little losses that occur along the way; on the day when we must lower our expectations, and let go of a dream, and get realistic about the possibilities for the rest of the journey...

Very powerful play.. in which you experience both the crisis to life that occurs when love happens to a crusty, ~~sole~~ settled, middle aged bachelor - & then the terrible pain of loss.

fact is that at twenty-five you don't know many of the "company of heaven" except by reputation. Several decades later you know a lot of them: many of them. The same thing happens with the hymn: "For all the Saints Who from their Labors Rest." You sing it mostly unconsciously for twenty or thirty years, enjoying Ralph Vough Williams' robust tune - and either cringing at the images or else not thinking about them... "And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph song, And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong, Alleluia! Alleluia!" And then someone you love dies - and the hymn becomes a very personal and powerful affirmation of something your intellect, your reason, cannot express or quite comprehend. I still think archangels sound like something the Episcopalians thought up, but the "whole company of heaven" is an idea I find I like more and more.

There is no more important life task than coming to terms with loss - finding some means to cope with the fact of loss and diminishment. Annie Dillard calls it "the extraordinary rent you have to pay as long as you stay." Author and columnist Judith Viorst has written a fine best seller, Necessary Losses, ~~the title of which I have shamelessly appropriated~~. Her thesis is that we not only have to endure an uninterrupted sequence of losses as long as we live, we grow as human beings into our fullness only to the degree that we cope with those losses: loss of loved ones, but also loss of ("romantic dreams, impossible expectations, illusions of power, and the loss of our own younger self.") [p. 2]

We grow by letting go, she says and her illustrations are both funny and also very poignant.

> "What am I doing with a mid-life crisis?" she asks.
>
> "This morning I was seventeen.
> I have barely begun the beguine and its
> good-night ladies already.
>
> While I've been wondering who to be
> when I grow up someday,
> my acne has vanished away and it's
> sagging kneecaps already." [p. 298]

Viorst writes from a feminine perspective but most men, I believe, can make a gender translation when she describes letting go of one thing after another: our waistlines, our vigor, our sense of adventure, our 20/20 vision, our trust in justice, our earnestness, our playfulness, our dream of being a tennis star, or a TV star, or a senator, or the woman for whom Paul Newman finally leaves JoAnne. We give up hoping to read all the books we once were bound to read, and to go to all the places we'd once vowed to visit. We give up hoping we'll save the world from cancer or from war. We even give up hoping that we'll succeed in becoming underweight." [p. 301]

The loss of a family member produces the highest stress and the most pain, but there are many losses along the way: the loss of children as they grow and move away; the loss of job by retirement or by being laid off; the loss of home and friends when we move to a new city; the loss of

A friend of mine went into a major depression when a fire destroyed his library + files - his life - he said

~~get realistic about the possibilities for the remainder of the journey.~~ worst here

And in this culture at this time it comes in the form of our obsession with youth and absolute refusal to acknowledge aging. || Dear Jessica Tandy struck a blow for all of us... but did you notice that the Health and Fitness ~~supplement~~ advertisement in the newspaper ~~last week was full of advertisements~~ are, not for ways to stay fit and healthy as you get older and the task becomes more difficult, but ads for liposuction and face lifts? That is, ways to deny the reality of aging and mortality.

How to live remains the question. How to find power to live in light of life's losses and the diminishments of aging and the personal insult of our mortality? How shall Israel live in exile? How shall we live through and beyond our losses?

The ancient promise is that death is part of God's economy, and that it is not an enemy, not because it isn't real and tragic, which it is, but because God's love creates life in its midst. Hard

I am cheered that Mark Spitz prepares for comeback - Nolan Ryan can still run a fast-ball - + Super Bowl MVP was oldest Player Back.

Did you ever actually see anybody in the work out room that actually looks like the people in the ads + TV commercials?

I haven't - The steam room in the ~~gym~~ health club I use - isn't anything you'd like to photograph!

Dr. Biggs - (tell me if I'm wrong) - talk to me about someone asking him for a recommendation of a ~~physician~~ ~~for your practice~~ for the people of prominent clubs - young physicians like you used to be

to believe? | You bet it is. | And yet, there is a gentle wisdom in God's economy; | people who have thought about it for very long and with any depth, seem always to conclude that there is a wisdom in this mortality of ours.

Maslow knew that without death there would be no love, no passion, no ecstasy.

John Updike in ~~his recently published memoir~~, Self Consciousness, closes with an essay in which he reflects on his own journey in maturing. "Aging," he says, "calls us outdoors, after the adult indoors of work and love-life and keeping stylish, into the lovely simplicities that we thought we had out-grown as children. | We come again to love the plain world, | its stone and wood, its air and water... | The act of seeing is itself glorious, and of hearing, and feeling and tasting." [p. 247] (x)

Frederick Buechner wrote that as a young man he would have jumped at the chance to remain young forever, but that he has changed his mind. "I love

we have grandchildren.. | not only am I married to a grandmoth - I am, indisputably, a grandfath. | Not only is there no denying it - I love it.. | And what I love - in addition to the fact that my daughter + hus. have ultimate responsibility (It is a free lunch!) | is the I am seeing things I forget - | or maybe didn't see.. | How absolutely beautiful a baby is - | how lovely a cry sounds - | how good a baby feels nuzzling as you hold him.. ~~It is~~ the act of seeing - is glorious now

H.'s memoir

wrote a poem about skiing - hurling 180 pds of saggy muscle + brittle bones down a slope ~~feet like a~~ walker + feel young

my life as much as I ever did and will cling to it for as long as I can, but life without death has become as unthinkable to me as day without night or waking without sleep."

There is a sense in which we are given the grace to love fully insofar as we acknowledge our mortality. And there is a sense in which we are given power to live fully insofar as we can trust God with our own death.

That is what is going on in the 11th chapter of the Gospel of John - in a New Testament story every bit as powerful and terrible and mysterious as Ezekiel's vision - the raising of Lazarus.

It is the event that immediately precedes Jesus' decision to go to Jerusalem. It is the event that so frightens everybody that the process is set in motion that will result in his arrest and crucifixion. The authorities understand with perfect clarity, that one who has power over death will threaten every other authority and power. So they determine, as soon as they hear about Lazarus,

to do away with him.

The exiled community must look at the reality of dry bones in order to know God's power of life.

Jesus must confront the death of his dear friend Lazarus - maybe his best and oldest friend... must go to the tomb on a blazing hot afternoon and there with the stench of death all around confront the fact of his own mortality. When he hears about Lazarus' death, he doesn't do anything for several days. Why? Because when you are thirty-three and your best friend dies and there's a rumor that your life is in danger... you simply don't want to have anything to do with it. And when he finally arrives at Bethlehem, Bethany he weeps for his dear dead friend, for friendship gone, but also for himself. Jesus, our brother, weeps tears of grief... for his own mortality.

What happened next will not be reduced to words and perhaps should not be...

But faith knows that God created life in the midst of death...

It's a very strong scene.

One of the peculiarities of this story is that

a fact that makes Martha (L's sis) angry.. she snaps at Jesus!

didn't he drop what he's doing and come.? well we don't know but I'm guessing it has something to do with the fact that

And that for Jesus, this drama will become personal, as personal as it can possible become; that he will know the end of his thirty-three year old life and will have to either give it up to despair and cynicism and rage - or trust it to God.

That is a metaphor for what comes to all of us and each of us on this journey.. that day - or string of days - when we know our mortality and must decide who we will trust and how we will live; that day when we must open our hands and let go of those we dearly love and give them up to God, and then noticing how empty our hands are - give our own death to God and in that giving, receive power to live.

The promise of the Gospel is this... in Jesus Christ God has loved us. That love gives us the gift of life... calls us to the adventure of living faithfully.. provides for our deepest needs... gives us confidence that we are adequate for the challenges and now, that love promises there is nothing ultimately to fear... There is no tragedy

Could here?

out of which God cannot call new life.

I do not know how Ezekiel saw what he saw and I do not know what happened that day when Jesus strode up to a tomb holding the dead body of his friend Lazarus, but I believe what he said there is for you and me:

"Take away the stone, come out, unbind him and let him go."

That's for you and me.

A week from today began ~~Even though the church must now journey through~~ the next difficult days of Lent: days for the remembering of the triumph of Palm Sunday turned into tragedy; for remembering betrayal and denial, humiliation and suffering... and finally - the tragic, beautiful mystery of Good Friday... even though the journey now becomes arduous, as it does for all of us along the way, it is a Sacred Journey, particularly now because of the one who said,

"I am the resurrection and the life: he who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live..."

+ + +

4- 15

Thanks Be to God ..

You are a child of God
God created you - calls you to the adventure of your life. God will provide ... God accepts you - has confidence in you - sees more in you than you ever have. God loves you - always - ~~will separate you~~ ever [illegible]

will ever separate you from

along the way of

your Sacred Journey.

Thanks Be